DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 316 381 RC 017 423

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TITLE Adolescents' Attitudes toward School and Teachers: From 1963 to 1989.
PUB DATE Sep 89
NOTE 12p.; For related document, see RC 017 410.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Environment; High Schools; Interviews; Rural Urban Differences; *Student Attitudes; Student Characteristics; *Student Evaluation of Teacher Performance; Student Government; Student Interests; Student Leadership; Student Participation; *Student School Relationship; *Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Small Towns

ABSTRACT

A comparison of adolescents views about school, based on data gathered 26 years apart, shows remarkable similarities. Students interviewed in 1963 were from Detroit schools while 1989 interviews were conducted in small-town schools of Texas, Missouri, and Minnesota. viewed poor teachers as lacking respect for students, unwilling to try to establish rapport, lacking a sense of humor, not caring much about teaching, and playing favorites. Student councils had little influence on academics and were mainly a perfunctory demonstration of representative democracy. Small-town students enjoyed their friends in school, small classes, extracurricular activities, and the caring attitudes of teachers and administrators, but deplored the lack of electives and advanced courses, indifferent teachers, alcohol abuse, gossip, closed campuses, and restrictive dress codes. Observation of classes in 1989 showed teachers talking 75% of the time, with 75% of their talk being unidirectional lecturing. Reform movements focus on the academic performance of teachers, but students focus on teachers' empathy and respect. American adolescents who live today in small towns do not have very different attitudes toward school and teachers from their urban counterparts of more than a generation ago. This report suggests that adolescents should be engaged in the selection and evaluation of teachers. Administrators should put greater emphasis on student councils and seek ways for students to serve their communities as part of the secondary school experience. (DHP)

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ADOLESCENTS ATTITUDES TOWARD SCHOOL AND TEACHERS:

FROM 1963 TO 1989

BY

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RC017423

September, 1989

Adolescents' Attitudes Toward School and Teachers: From 1963 to 1989

by

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"Now I lay me down to rest,
I pray to pass tomorrow's test
If I should die before I wake
That's one less test I'll have to take."
Anonymous Adolescent

Although test anxiety was also quite common three decades ago, when one of us wrote about adolescents' concerns in this journal, (Schmuck, R.A., 1965), the most salient concerns of adolescents have been and continue to be interpersonal and social-emotional. Interviews carried out in 1963 with over 200 working and middle-class teenagers from the greater Detroit area revealed that they were concerned with "making sense out of the multiple social demands of parents, teachers, and peers, while striving to become an autonomous and integrated individual." With regard to their teachers, they were most concerned with: (1) Teachers not getting to know the students, e.g., "We get too little personal attention from our teachers", "Teachers don't care if they get to know you or not", and "Our teachers are like machines; they just 'spiel' out information." (2) Teachers lacking interest in teaching and youth, e.g., "He comes to class unprepared", "She doesn't seem to care if we learn", and "They aren't even interested in what they are teaching", and (3) Teachers showing partiality for particular students, e.g., "They have their pets", "Many girls get away with murder, simply because they are girls", and "You have to 'brown-up' the teachers to do well."

We compared today's adolescents' attitudes toward school and teachers with those of their counterparts of more than a generation ago. This time we drove to school districts on the back roads of America, however, to study the cultures of small-town schools. We traveled 160 days over 9,452 miles in a 22 ft Tioga RV, covered 21 states and collected data in 25 small-town districts, west of Detroit, e.g., Bangs, Texas, Kahoka, Missouri, and Karlsted, Minnesota. Using Dialogue Information Services and a map, we randomly chose isolated districts of between 400 and 2,000 students, that were more than 75 miles from a major college of education. We seldom drove on the interstates; instead we followed what William Least Heat Moon has referred to as the "Blue Highways" of America.

Although we primarily collected data from educators and board members, we also interviewed a diverse sample of 212 working and middle-class teenagers (104 girls and 108 boys) singly, in pairs, in small groups, and in classes. The students, ranged in age from 13 to 18. We interviewed college-preparatory and vocationally-oriented students, class officers, athletes, and informal leaders. We even interviewed a few high-school students soon after they had received a paddling from the principal. We also made informal observations of student behavior in the community and formal observations of 50 minutes each in 30 secondary classrooms.

SCHOOLS AS SOCIAL CENTERS OF COMMUNITIES

We were impressed by how important schools were to the citizens of the small towns we visited. People of all ages were at school often for education, entertainment, social life, and community meetings. As one superintendent put it, "School is bigger than life in this town". In one town of 5,200, the Christmas pageant drew over 6,000 spectators. In another, 75% of the townspeople attended the Friday night football games regularly.

The high schools were the most active social centers of the communities. Along with the usual 6 or 7 hours a day of academic classes, they held sports' events, club meetings, potluck dinners, recreational events, musical concerts, open houses, and theatrical presentations. The majority of students arrived at school 30 minutes or more before classes began and did not return home until after 5:30 p.m. The students typically knew all of the other students in the school. Since 40% of their teachers participated as coaches, sponsors, or advisors in after-school activities, the students also had considerable daily contact with many teachers outside of class. A number of principals and teachers bragged that they could name every student in the school.

The high-school seniors we talked with felt ambivalent about their futures and sad about their towns. Although they enjoyed the social support of small-town life, they realized that they would have to move away from family and friends and the security of a close-knit community to pursue their adult careers. As graduation neared, many seniors began to realize, perhaps for the first time, that they had been a big fish in a small pond. In less than a year they would become one of many fish swimming in a large sea. Most of them also were conscious of their town's economic vulnerability, and knew that they would never be able to obtain employment there. One student told us, "I'd hate to see this town die, but it looks like it will." Another lamented, "This was a nice place to grow up; it makes me sad to see everything dying." One student with a glimmer of optimism said, "I won't live here during my adult years because there are too few opportunities, but maybe I'll retire here."

ATTITUDES TOWARD SCHOOL

We started the student interviews by asking for the best and worst things about the school. The rank order of the most frequently occurring answers for the best things were:

1. Lots of friends.
2. Everybody knows everybody else.
3. Small classes with individual attention.
4. Sports, clubs, and other extracurricular activities.
5. No drugs, muggings, or weapons.
6. Caring attitudes of teachers and administrators.

The rank order of the most frequently occurring answers for the worst things were:

1. Too few electives or advanced courses.
2. Teachers who don't care and aren't friendly.
3. Alcohol abuse.
4. Gossip and rumors about sexual behavior or drinking.
5. Closed campus, particularly at lunch.
6. Restrictive dress code.

We went on to ask students how they felt about the school and the town. Although they frequently started out by stating favorable sentiments, well over 50% quickly pointed out how boring school was. When we probed them about their boredom, they spoke about particular classes and teachers (totaling, we surmise, about 30% of each student's classroom experience). They seldom responded negatively, however, toward the school as a whole, nor were they frustrated with extracurricular activities, except for those few students in music or theater who complained about the over emphasis placed on boys' sports.

Unlike their urban counterparts, most small-town adolescents felt involved in extracurricular activities such as music, sports, theatre, TV, and services or special interest clubs. Only about 10% of students were clearly alienated from school and many of those spoke of serious family disturbances.

The small-town adolescents also differed from their urban counterparts in their feelings of safety and security. About half of the schools we visited did not have locks on the lockers. Moreover, a considerable number of students spoke about the muggings, knife fights, and handguns present in intercity schools to emphasize how secure they felt in their own schools and towns. Also, in contrast to urban students, they encountered very little, if any problems with drugs. Instead, we saw high school students actively campaigning against drugs almost everywhere.

We were surprised, however, to find the paddle still being used in some parts of the country, even in senior high schools.

After school was over one afternoon, we saw 19 high school students (18 boys and 1 girl) lined up outside the principal's office to get paddled. Not apparently frightened or even ill at ease, they accepted two swats, perhaps as a badge of honor, and as a superior alternative to spending one hour after school in a detention study hall.

We talked with the principal of an elementary school in another state about the uses of corporal punishment in that setting. She said that only she, herself, administered the paddling, and that she swatted only upper-grade boys "to get their attention and to change their behavior." She did not paddle girls. She went on to tell us that the paddle itself must be made of wood, must be 17 inches long, four inches wide, and 1/2 inch thick, and must not have holes in it. Before paddling one of the disobedient boys, she would ask him about any bruises or bumps that he might already have on his underside, and if there was any medical reason why he should not be paddled. After taking those precautions, she told the culprit to bend over and she hit him firmly twice on the buttocks. In cases where the paddling did not change the wayward boy's behavior, the principal would seek to suspend him from school for a few days as a next step.

STUDENT COUNCILS

About 20% of the students we interviewed were student council officers; all of them had been elected by their classmates to serve on the student council. We were interested in how they thought the councils were contributing to their schools. In general, we found high student participation and involvement in the schools without much influence or power over important educational matters. The elected student leaders told us that although they were busily engaged in 3 or 4 extra-curricular activities, they had little voice in influencing how their school operated. The sorts of activities they influenced were running concessions' stands at athletic events, organizing homecoming events, designing a schedule of school-wide assemblies, procuring the music for dances, and persuading the principal to allow one day in the spring for students to wear shorts.

One high-school principal lamented that this year the student council had been particularly inactive. He told us, "I tried to get them motivated but they just wouldn't do much." We asked him for an example. "Well", he said, "student councils usually get a Christmas tree for the school. This year I mentioned it to council members in November, but they didn't bother getting one. So there was no Christmas tree."

In stark contrast to our findings of low student influence in most secondary schools, we did find a high school in the deep South that was still benefiting from earlier contributions by the student

council. A racially segregated district in 1970 had been successfully changed into a desegregated district. The administrators arranged for the student council leaders of both the Black and the White schools to meet together and to establish student policies and programs. As a consequence of those meetings, the students had a voice in shaping the policies of their new school; they produced a Student Handbook which was endorsed by the administrators. Even today that school district is an exemplary case of racial desegregation.

On our recent visit, however, we found no school, not even the exemplary one in the deep South, in which the student council was a key player in any important aspect of school life, except for social events. In most places, administrators told us that the student council was ineffective if not inoperative. Four schools did provide leadership training to students, but in most cases, when a student council existed, it was mainly a perfunctory demonstration of representative democracy.

ATTITUDES TOWARD TEACHERS

We went on in the interview to ask students about good and bad teaching. We asked for behavior examples, not for names of teachers. The rank order of the most frequently occurring answers for good teaching were:

1. Gives students respect, is patient, and easy to get along with.
2. Makes the subject interesting and fun, by involving students in activities, and demonstrations.
3. Tells jokes and smiles a lot. Good sense of humor.
4. Listens to student questions, and makes changes in class to help students learn.

The rank order of the most frequently occurring answers for bad teaching were:

1. Low respect for students, lacks patience, and treats you like you are stupid.
2. Seldom smiles, very serious and stern, and issues either too harsh or too permissive discipline.
3. Doesn't care about or pay attention to individuals; not helpful.
4. Doesn't explain well, lazy, hands out work sheets and tests; you have to learn everything on your own.
5. Has favorites; favors the smart students or one sex over the other.

The students thought that about 30% of their teachers, and particularly those teachers who steered clear of taking part in extra-curricular activities, were making school boring, and at

times, stressful for them. The students viewed those teachers as lacking respect for adolescents, unwilling to try to establish rapport with them, lacking a sense of humor, not caring very much about teaching, and playing favorites.

Even a cursory look at the data from the two generations of adolescent cohorts, dissimilar as they are in place of residence, reveals an amazing similarity and overlap of thinking through time and space. The attitudes of small-town adolescents toward their teachers today are virtually identical to the concerns about teachers of their suburban and urban counterparts in the early 60's.

OBSERVATIONS OF STUDENTS

Perhaps the most repeated student behavior we observed in the community was students, clad in jeans, T-shirts, and sweat shirts, driving cars and trucks through the center of town on Friday, Saturday, and even Sunday nights between 9:00 p.m. and midnight. The ritual, well known to suburban and urban adolescents, is variously called, "cruising the gut", "shooting the loop", "roving the strip", and "cruising the mall". In one town, we saw adolescents driving through a large shopping mall, instead of the old downtown, apparently because, from their point of view, that was "where the action was" now. Even in the small towns, where distances are not so great as in the cities, adolescents ride in cars. They do not walk to school, to the movies, to softball, to the hamburger joint, or to a date. They do not walk in the countryside just to experience nature.

Of the 30 secondary classes we observed, we witnessed in 22 what Ned Flanders (1970) once called the rule of 2/3, i.e., 2/3 of classroom talk is teacher's talk and 2/3 of that is unidirectional lecturing. John Goodlad (1984) substantiated Flanders' view with his repeated observations, of classrooms during the past generation. With our recent experience, we would even modify Flanders' maxim to the rule of 3/4.

Twenty-two of 30 classes were clearly teacher controlled; we saw teachers standing up front lecturing to rows of students with only occasional student talk as a response to teacher questions. Most teachers apparently had not been influenced by one of Mark Twain's favorite sayings, which we saw printed in calligraphy in a junior high class, "If we were supposed to talk more then listen, we'd have 2 mouths and one ear." That seems to be what teachers try to convince students to do -- to listen to them -- but they do not seem to apply Twain's maxim to themselves when they are teaching.

Again and again we saw teachers who were frustrated by their inability to motivate students to work hard on the curriculum. One

9th-grade teacher reached the end of his rope one day while we sat in the back of the room. He scolded his 26 students during a health class for not completing an assignment on time. Actually 13 students had completed the assignment and 13 had not. "I'm disappointed," he said. "I thought more of you would have your reports done. You are being prepared here for life. Will you tell your boss? 'I'm sorry, I didn't get it done!' You must be responsible to set your homework done on time. Mom can't do it; Dad can't do it. You must be responsible to do your own work on time."

In that angry vein, the teacher castigated the students for their lack of achievement motivation and academic productivity. They said nothing. He did not pause in his tirade, nor did he ask them for their thoughts or feelings. Finally, after about 25 minutes of his anger, the teacher commanded the students to work alone and silently at their desks completing the homework assignment, apparently having forgotten that 1/2 of them had completed the assignment. He was no closer to communicating with the students after the tirade than before it. Later that day we saw one of the students in the class wearing a cap on which was printed the inscription, "Homework causes brain damage."

In 8 classes, student-to-student talk of some sort was planned by the teacher. Twice we saw students in pairs sitting together and responding cooperatively to teacher questions or teacher directions. Four times we saw students in small groups working together on a project. Twice we saw high-school English teachers, engaging both sides of their students' brains in learning.

One of those teachers carried out a poignant, thoroughly absorbing discussion with 15 students about a short story by Ann Beatty, entitled, "Imagine A Day at the End of Your Life". That story concerns a man growing old, who has felt subsumed by his family. He finds himself at last by sensing nature, smelling the wet grass, seeing the trees turn green, and listening to the birds and the breeze. The teacher sat informally relaxed with the students and asked them to discuss their reactions to the story. He gave his own thoughts and feelings but encouraged them to talk about theirs and they did. Together they talked about how they now lived and how they wanted to live; they probed the meaning of their lives together for 30 minutes.

In another class, geographically far away from the other, we saw small groups of two to four students, work together to create a story with illustrations that they were to read to Kindergartners. The teacher had the students read childrens' books and discuss the sorts of things that interest a 5-year old, e.g., animals that act like people, learning through active experience, and everything coming out okay in the end. The students had one week to create the stories outside class. They were to write the script, to draw the pictures, and to plan for an oral presentation

to 5-year olds.

On the day we visited class some of the small groups were presenting stories to their classmates. The teacher had already announced that only three stories were to be read to the 5-year olds, and that the class would have to vote on the top 3 stories in the class. So, after each story was presented, the teacher urged the students to take notes and to do some tentative rating. Later, the whole class would decide on the top three stores.

The four stories we saw presented were delightful and creative. The presenters were articulate and well organized. More importantly, the rest of the students were captivated, enthusiastic, silly, and having fun. The teacher sat in the back of the room listening. He spoke only to call on each group in turn and to remind the class of its responsibility to select the top three.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

American adolescents who live today in small towns do not have very different attitudes toward school and teachers from their urban counterparts of more than a generation ago. Instead of being concerned about the curriculum, homework, and tests, they think much more about their relationships with teachers. They want their teachers to respect them, to engage them in joyful activities in the classroom, to have fun with them, and to respond flexibly in helping them learn.

The adolescents' views, although understood by many principals and teachers, seem to go unheeded by perhaps 30% of secondary-school educators. Moreover, the adolescents' views have not been taken into consideration in the literature of the school reform movement of the 1980's. The reform reports focus on the intellectual competence and the academic performance of teachers, not on their compassion, empathy, respect, and love of young people. The reports emphasize teachers' intelligence, academic achievement, course work within the liberal arts, and years of college education. They do not focus on the social-emotional characteristics of teachers which the adolescents, themselves, emphasize. The adolescents we interviewed were not concerned with their teachers' subject-matter competence, breath of knowledge, or ability to do well in college classrooms. Rather, they wanted teachers to be human beings who would show trust, respect, and understanding of youth.

We believe that adolescents should be engaged integrally in the selection and evaluation of teachers. They should serve on selection committees, both to interview and to observe prospective candidates for teaching positions in their school. They should be asked by administrators to respond regularly on questionnaires about their teachers and they should be interviewed often by the

administrators about their teachers' strong and weak points. Administrators should also ask students to give specific examples of teaching behaviors that are helpful and unhelpful for learning. Administrators, in turn, should share summaries of those student responses with their teachers as an impetus to upgrade instruction and to humanize school life.

We believe, too, that administrators and teachers should put greater emphasis than they do now on student councils. Well-functioning councils give students an opportunity to experience democracy first hand, i.e., they can learn to lead effectively, to work in groups cooperatively, and to act responsibly on behalf of the school. Moreover, making it legitimate for councils to give formal input to administrators and teachers about the curriculum and instruction can help in school improvement efforts. In one district we visited, the superintendent and several teachers and parents accompanied the student representatives from the high school to state-wide leadership conference. There, the adults and the students shared their perceptions of some of the limitations in the school's curriculum. Those students felt good about the important contributions they were making to their school's program. Unfortunately, too few of the secondary administrators and teachers with whom we talked truly believe that students ought to be engaged in criticizing the school's curriculum.

We believe, finally, that administrators should seek ways for students to serve their communities as part of their secondary school experience. Secondary students serving their communities would be particularly apropos in small-town America, since the high school already serves as the people's gathering place and the community social center. What we have in mind are students working in day-care centers and preschools, cleaning up the streets and alleys or otherwise beautifying the face of the town, acting as big brother or sister to younger children, writing columns for the local newspaper, and reading to or writing letters for the feeble seniors of local nursing homes. We do not think that the administrators of small-town schools would have to alter their lives very much to help their students to become involved in those sorts of community services.

The most salient concerns of adolescents, all over America, are interpersonal and social emotional. They have to do with relationships with peers, parents, teachers, administrators, and the community. Underlying those concerns is their search for identity and self esteem. The constructive engagement of 13 to 18 year olds in the evaluation of teaching, criticism of the curriculum, and service to the community can not only enhance their self esteem but can also facilitate school and community improvement. The secondary schools of small towns, because of their manageable size, lack of organizational complexity, and centrality to the community, offer a fertile soil for the growth of participatory democracy in America.

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